

Milton's Noseprints: Momentum in Keats's 'Doggrel'

Speed was Keats's element. He wrote in a rush. 'Scribble' was his word for his method of composition; he once used it three times in a single page of a letter to his sister.¹ He wrote so energetically that his words collided or dropped letters, leading to fluent misspellings and accidental portmanteaus. In describing the colour of a jam stain in (and on) a letter to Fanny Brawne, he wrote 'purplue,' and was so pleased that he elaborated: 'I did not know whether to say purple or blue, so in the mixture of the thought wrote purplue which may be an excellent name for a colour made up of those two, and would suit well to start next spring.'² It is in the onward pull of enthusiasm that Keats often makes his finest discoveries.

This is something akin to what Cox calls 'kinetic' enthusiasm, the urge 'to possess, to go to something'³. For Keats, the urge to write and the act of writing were bodily compulsions. In his letters, before or after he launches into song, he pleads helplessness, apologising with a touch of Ricksian embarrassment: 'Now I purposed to write you a serious poetical letter... Yet I cannot write in prose, It is a sun-shiny day and I cannot...'⁴ '[D]escriptions are bad at all times – I did not intend to give you any;

¹ *The Letters of John Keats, Vol. I.* Ed. Hyder E. Rollins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958. Letter 94, p. 312-313

² Keats, John. *The Major Works.* Ed. Elizabeth Cook. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 524

³ James Joyce, quoted in Cox, Jeffrey. *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 182

⁴ *Letters of Keats, Vol. I.* Letter 58, p. 220

but how can I help it?’⁵ ‘My dear Fanny I am ashamed of writing you such stuff...’⁶

‘I am sorry I am so indolent as to write such stuff as this – it cant be help’d –’⁷

Helpless before his delight in language, he surrenders with little resistance – indeed, he flings himself into helplessness with glee.

Nowhere is this speed and physicality more strongly felt than in Keats’s doggrel poems, the verse composed extempore in letters to family and friends. I use the term ‘doggrel’ advisedly; it is Keats’s own. ‘Here’s some doggrel for you - Perhaps you would like a bit of B—hrell’, Keats nonchalantly prefaced a poem in a letter to Haydon.⁸ Haydon replied, ‘My dear Keats/Your bi—ell as you call it, is beautiful & I take it as a great friendly kindness to remember me in that way – as often as you feel inclined to give vent remember I am always ready with pleasure to receive the result –’⁹ It was encouragement such as this that allowed the doggrel to embody Keats’s enthusiasm. Keats’s letters were ‘above all...a space in which he was sure of his audience’s interest and support, a space entirely free of the intense anxieties and aggression induced by the expectations of his reading publics’, Barnard observes.¹⁰ Keats revelled in the safely communal experience of letter-writing, and it was an essential part of his poetic character. Writing to his brothers from Scotland, he proclaimed: ‘I shall learn poetry here, and shall henceforth write more than ever, for the abstract endeavor of being able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is

⁵ *Letters of Keats, Vol. I.* Letter 91, p. 301

⁶ *Letters of Keats, Vol. I.* Letter 94, p. 315

⁷ *Letters of Keats, Vol. I.* Letter 100, p. 351

⁸ *Letters of John Keats, Vol. I.* Letter 70, p. 250

⁹ *Letters of John Keats, Vol. I.* Letter 73, p. 257

¹⁰ Barnard, John. ‘Keats’s letters.’ In *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan Wolfson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 122

harvested from these grand materials...and put into ethereal existence for the relish of one's fellows'.¹¹ In Keats's circle of friends, language was the foundation of community: 'I have had a great deal of pleasant time with Rice lately, and am getting initiated into a little Cant – they call dr[i]nking deep dying scarlet, and when you breathe in your wartering they bid you cry hem and play it off – they call good Wine a pretty tippie, and call getting a Child knocking out an apple, stopping at a Tave[r]n they call hanging out – Where do you sup? is where do you hang out?'¹²

Keats's doggrel unites these ideas of communal experience, unselfconsciousness, and linguistic relish. It is therefore in the doggrel that we can best understand Keats's poetics of momentum. By momentum I mean a kinetic enthusiasm that pervades both the structure and the themes of the doggrel – in the formal mimicry of physical motion, the evocation of movement and journeying as a metaphor, and the speed and spontaneity inherent in poems that were composed in letters. Propulsion, both literal and metaphorical, is the doggrel's driving theme.

In a short essay, it is impossible to give all of Keats's doggrel the attention that it deserves. I will therefore work from a cluster of letters written in the spring and summer of 1818: 'Where be ye going you devon Maid' from the letter to Haydon of March 1st, 'Over the hill and over the dale' from the letter to Rice of March 24th, and 'There was a naughty boy' from the letter to his sister Fanny of July 3rd. These letters occur in the lead-up to the most miraculous period of Keats's poetic career, what Gittings calls his 'living year'; not coincidentally, I would argue, they are particularly rich in doggrel. The freedom of Keats's experimentation with form and his solidifying

¹¹ *Letters of Keats, Vol. I.* Letter 91, p. 301

¹² *Letters of Keats, Vol. I.* Letter 48, p. 197

relationship with his circle of friends in these months produce another facet of this concept of momentum, an ever-quickenning progress towards a singular achievement.

Keats's letter to Haydon is the first place in which Keats uses the term 'doggerel' to describe his own poetry. Both of the poems enclosed in this letter, 'For there's Bishop's Teign' and 'Where be ye going you Devon maid', deal in classically Keatsian sensory relish, full of 'cream/All spread upon barley bread –'¹³ But most notable for our purposes is the insight that 'Where be ye going you Devon maid' gives us into how Keats heard his own light verse.

Keats almost certainly had Chatterton in mind in the days when he was writing these poems. In her edition of the *Complete Poems*, Allott compares the opening stanza of 'Where be ye going you Devon maid' with a stanza from Chatterton's *Aella*. The similarities are self-evident:

[Chatterton]
Mie husbände, Lord Thomas, a forrester boulde,
As ever clove pynne, or the baskette,
Does no cherysauncys from Elynour houlde,
I have ytte as soon as I aske ytte...¹⁴

[Keats]
Where be ye going you Devon maid
And what have ye there i' the basket?
Ye tight little fairy – just fresh from the dairy
Will ye give me some cream if I ask it –¹⁵

In 1849, Keats's friend Benjamin Bailey, corresponding with the biographer Richard Milnes, recalled the way that Keats read Chatterton out loud: he would 'recite, or

¹³ *Major Works*. 179

¹⁴ Quoted in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott. London: Longman, 1970. 318

¹⁵ *Major Works*. 181

chant in his peculiar manner.’¹⁶ It is not unlikely that Keats heard ‘Devon maid’ in a chant, the same way that he heard Chatterton.

It is hard to imagine the poem in Keats’s letter to Rice being read any other way.

Over the hill and over the dale
And over the bourn to Dawlish –
Where Gingerbread Wives have a scanty sale
And gingerbred nuts are smallish –

Rantipole Betty she ran down a hill
And kick’d up her petticoats fairly
Says I I’ll be Jack if you will be Gill
So she sat on the Grass debonnairly –

Here’s somebody coming, here’s somebody coming!
Says I ‘tis the wind at a parley
So without any fuss any hawing or humming
She lay on the grass debonnairly –

Here’s somebody here and here’s somebody *there!*
Says I hold your tongue you young Gipse
So she held her tongue and lay plump and fair
And dead as a venus tipsy –

O who wouldn’t hie to Dawlish fair
O who wouldn’t stop in a Meadow
O who would not rumple the daisies there
And make the wild fern for a bed do –¹⁷

The poem’s punctuation (or lack thereof) demands a driving, chanting rhythm. This is not the result of mere grammatical carelessness. Keats, unlike some writers of the period, was undoubtedly concerned with punctuation; not long after his letter to Rice, he sent his publishers a long list of errata for *Endymion*, including many grammatical corrections.¹⁸ Yet the only punctuation marks to be found in ‘Over the hill and over

¹⁶ *The Keats Circle, Vol. II*. Ed. Hyder E. Rollins. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965. 276

¹⁷ *Major Works*. (N.B.: I choose to refer to a text of this poem that is separate from the Rollins copy of the letter for the sake of clarity and to avoid transcribing a few of Keats’s more common slips of the pen, i.e. dropped r’s. Cook’s edition is the best I have been able to find when it comes to preserving Keats’s original punctuation and spelling within reason.) 181

¹⁸ *Letters of John Keats, Vol. I*. Letter 78, p. 272

the dale' are hyphens, exclamation points, and the occasional apostrophe. Particularly in the case of the missing inverted commas, it is clear that Keats here shunned any punctuation that would suggest a pause. He punctuates only to truncate, to emphasise, or to spur.

The reasons for this become clear in the context of the letter in which the poem was enclosed. Keats begins:

Being in the midst of your favourite Devon, I should not by rights, pen one word but it should contain a vast portion of Wit, Wisdom and learning – for I have heard that Milton ere he wrote his Answer to Salmasius came into these parts, and for on whole Month, rolled himself, for three whole hours in a certain meadow hard by us – where the mark of his nose at equidistances is still shown.¹⁹

Taken together, the poem and the letter form the irresistible impression of a specific sort of momentum: a roll down a hill. The 'Scholars rotary motion' finds metrical expression in the doggerel as it follows in his equidistant noseprints.²⁰ The reference to Jack and Gill brings 'tumbling' to mind – and while the word itself is never used in the poem, the motion is certainly evoked.

Jack and Gill leave their mark on the metre, that four-beat pulse found in children's songs worldwide.²¹ But the most Keatsian aspect of this sly nursery-rhyme metre is its inconsistency. After three stanzas of rattling speed, the metre fractures, and with it the poem's euphemistic coyness:

Here's somebody here and here's somebody *there!*
Says I hold your tongue you young Gipsy.
So she held her tongue and lay plump and fair
And dead as a venus tipsy –²²

¹⁹ *Letters of John Keats, Vol. I. Letter 72, p. 254*

²⁰ *Letters of John Keats, Vol. I. Letter 72, p. 254*

²¹ Burling, Robbins. 'The Metrics of Children's Verse: A Cross-Linguistic Study.' *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 68, No. 6, 1966. 1419-1420

²² *Major Works*. 182

‘And dead as a venus tipsy’ disrupts, insisting on drawn-out vowels where before there were choppy syllables. On a first reading, it is difficult not to stumble over the words in the compulsion to read them at the same pace as the previous lines and place an accent on the second syllable of ‘tipsy.’ The tone of the poem trips the reader up, as well. Far from the ‘debonnair’ coyness of the earlier lines, we are brought up short: Rantipole Betty is, if not a drunken prostitute, as like one as she could be. Metrically and thematically, Keats comes to rest with a bump.

The next notable piece of doggrel appears in a letter from Keats’s walking tour of Scotland. It was a revolutionary moment in his poetic career. As Rodriguez notes, ‘Keats wrote a relatively greater number of poems for inclusion in his letters during the walking tour than at any other period in his letter-writing days...[M]any individual lines from these poems and many words from these letters constitute the greater clutter of things Keats was to select from and articulate almost immediately upon returning to Hampstead.’²³ The most noteworthy of the wealth of Scottish doggrel poem, both formally and thematically, is ‘There was a naughty boy.’ The poem is often anthologised under the title, ‘A song about myself’, for this is how Keats prefaced it. Written for his beloved sister, it is the most personal piece of doggrel that he composed, and a perfect representation of his momentum.

Metrically, ‘There was a naughty boy’ works in an opposite direction to ‘Over the hill and over the dale’, developing from irregularity to precision. The structure of the poem is percussive; after introductory quatrains, the lines are short and choppy, usually only two or three words long. Nowhere else is the truth of Elizabeth Cook’s

²³ Rodriguez. *Book of the Heart*. 137

observation on Keats's way of taking 'steps with metrical feet' more evident.²⁴ On a walking tour, Keats writes in the clipped rhythm of footsteps. In doing so, he develops a pattern of 'establishment, departure, return with a difference' that he was even then following in his life and poetry.²⁵

He starts out wandering. The metre of its first stanza is so unpredictable that it is almost not a metre at all, and proves nearly impossible to read aloud without stumbling or putting emphases in strange places. Lines like

A hair brush
Comb ditto
New Stockings
For old ones
Would split O!
This knapsack
Tight at 's back
He revetted close
And followe'd his Nose
To the North
To the North
And follow'd his nose
To the North –²⁶

defy any imposition of order. The next stanza regularises somewhat; here we see Keats beginning to play a characteristic game with the sounds of his words. Christopher Ricks, referring to Keats's allusions to Shakespeare, describes a 'diffusion of atmosphere', a subtle web of reference that creates a sense of restructured familiarity, a gracefully distorted echo.²⁷ A similar claim can be made for the effect of Keats's use of assonance. Keats's friend Bailey recorded Keats's 'principal of melody in verse': 'Keats's theory was that the vowels should be...

²⁴ *Major Works*. Introduction, xxvii

²⁵ Minahan, John. *Word Like a Bell: John Keats, Music and the Romantic Poet*. Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1992. 103

²⁶ *Major Works*. 204

²⁷ Ricks, Christopher. 'Keats.' *Allusion to the Poets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 166

interchanged like differing notes in music, to prevent monotony.²⁸ These patternings, these echoes, draw the reader on irresistibly.

The lines

And wrote
In his coat
When the weather
Was cool
Fear of gout
And without
When the weather
Was warm –
Och the charm
When we choose
To follow ones nose
To the north
To the north
To follow one's nose to the north!²⁹

demonstrate a very Keatsian revision along the lines of these 'principles of melody'.

Keats's original lines, which he altered in the letter, were:

And wrote
In his coat
When the weather
Was warm
Fear of gout
And without
When the weather
Was cool –³⁰

By exchanging the position of 'warm' and 'cool', he created the pleasantly disrupted echo of coat/cool, preserved and extended the alliteration that drew him to the original wrote/when/weather/was/warm sequence, and gave himself the opportunity for one of his interchanging, similar-yet-different vowel echoes in warm/charm, which resolves in the evolution of warm/charm/choose/nose, a pattern moving from quasi-assonance

²⁸ Quoted in Bate, W.J. 'Evolution Toward Qualities of Permanent Value.' *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*. Ed. M.H. Abrams. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975

²⁹ *Major Works*. 205

³⁰ *Letters of John Keats, Vol. I*. Letter 94, p. 313-314

to alliteration to quasi-assonance. This woven pattern of sound draws the reader irresistibly on, creating a simultaneous cohesiveness, what Eagleton calls a ‘unity of identity and difference’, and forward motion, one sound sliding into another.³¹

In the next stanza, however, Keats’s experimentation with rhymes and assonance leads him back to wandering. He is so pleased with the interwoven echoes in ‘Of Fish a pretty kettle’ that he turns them over a few times:

Of Fish a pretty kettle
A kettle – A kettle
Of Fish a pretty kettle
A kettle!³²

But then Keats comes to the final stanza. At once, his meandering turns to a purposeful stride: the metre snaps tight, and the rhyme falls into an intricate, interlocking pattern in a culmination of every formal technique hinted at in the earlier stanzas.

There was a naughty boy
And a naughty boy was he
He ran away to Scotland
The people for to see –
There he found
That the ground
Was as hard
That a yard
Was as long,
That a song
Was as merry,
That a cherry
Was as red –
That lead
Was as weighty
That fourscore
Was as eighty
That a door
Was as wooden
As in England –³³

³¹ Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007

³² *Major Works*. 206

³³ *Major Works*. 207

Much as in 'Over the hill and over the dale,' the tone of the poem changes along with its metrical structure. Though the language stays childlike, there is a new cynicism or wistfulness – or both – in the lines. Clarity of understanding and clarity of metre go hand in hand. As the poem's 'naughty boy' realises what he has gone to look for, he 'walks' more quickly and with more purpose, and when he realises that he is not going to find what he is looking for, he stops – he stands.

So he stood in
His shoes
And he wonderd
He wonderd
He stood in his
Shoes and he wonder'd –³⁴

The impact of these final lines is not dissimilar from that of Andres Rodriguez's suggestion that '[i]n all its emanations, the subject of the letters from Scotland is experience – experience that led him nowhere, to a blind mist on a mountaintop.'³⁵ What is crucial here is the way in which the poem comes to a halt, and to a silence. Just as Keats comes to the bottom of his hill, and to a brief cynicism, in 'Over the hill and over the dale,' he finds that he is forced to stop and wonder here. Stillness is the essential counterpart to momentum, 'no mere negation of sound or noise, but a presence to be felt and almost heard'.³⁶ As Minahan puts it, 'And isn't silence part of any music? And doesn't silence have its music too?'³⁷

It is a strange truth that very little critical attention has been paid to Keats's doggerel. Many of the poems, while often tidied up and anthologised, don't make it

³⁴ *Major Works*. 207

³⁵ Rodriguez. *Book of the Heart*. 162

³⁶ Swaminathan, S.R. *The Still Image in Keats's Poetry*. Salzburg: Salzburg University Press, 1981. 12

³⁷ Minahan. *Word Like a Bell*. 195

into the indexes of even the most wide-ranging critical works on Keats. Storey, in writing on humour in poetry, makes a number of good points regarding the critical ignorance of Keats as a humorous poet – and then goes on to ignore Keats’s light verse altogether, instead looking for humour in more ‘serious’ works against a backdrop of unspecified ‘extempore nonsensical rhyming’.³⁸ Minahan opines that ‘the humour of [Keats’s] letters rarely enters his poetry...’, as if poetry enclosed in a letter were somehow subsumed by it.³⁹

The error lies in seeing a ‘fundamental incongruity’ between Keats and his doggrel.⁴⁰ The ‘temptation to draw a sharp line between the letter-writer and the poet’ has been thoroughly debunked; the challenge now is for critics to stop drawing sharp lines between the letters and the extemporaneous versifying that was an intrinsic part of them, and of their writer.⁴¹ In the doggrel, we see the John Keats who is Junkets, who writes for the ‘relish of his fellows’.⁴² To discount this relish is to efface one of Keats’s most vital sources of poetic innovation, and to ignore a flowering of Romantic spontaneity to which one is tempted to attach a Blakean epigraph: ‘Energy is Eternal Delight.’⁴³ Keats’s energy is delight, and his delight is energy. In this reciprocity was the momentum that propelled him.

³⁸ Storey, Mark. *Poetry and Humour from Cowper to Clough*. London: Macmillan, 1979. 68

³⁹ Minahan. *Word Like a Bell*. 25

⁴⁰ Stillinger, Jack. ‘Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats.’ In *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*. Ed. Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998. 13

⁴¹ Storey. *Poetry and Humour*. 64

⁴² *Letters of John Keats. Vol. I. Letter 91*, p. 3

⁴³ Blake, William. ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.’ *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 3rd edition, ed. Duncan Wu. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 208